CERT's growth spurt

Spurred by federal funding and increasingly seen by local officials as a valuable way to engage citizens, community emergency response teams are multiplying rapidly.

Olathe Fire Department/Mike Hall

Members of the Olathe, Kan., CERT rescue a victim during a disaster drill last year.

By Colin A. Campbell

What a difference a couple of years can make, especially once attention and funding are focused on something.

In late 2001, there were about 170 community emergency response teams in 28 U.S. states and territories. Then, in his January 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush announced the formation of the Citizen Corps Council. Since then, the number of CERTs has skyrocketed to 1,200 teams in 54 states and territories.

Sam Isenberger, the CERT program manager for FEMA's Emergency Management Institute, Emmitsburg, Md., attributes the increase to a number of reasons. "For one," he says, "the grant money gave the CERT program the momentum that it needed." Congress made $5 million available for CERTs in the 2002 supplemental appropriations bill.

In addition, Isenberger says, for years, "response agencies across the country have been looking for ways to involve citizens, and CERT gave them a way to do this. After 9-11, citizens were looking for a way to be better prepared and contribute to the community, and the match was made."

Frank Lucier agrees. The former San Francisco Fire Department lieutenant, who ran the CERT there, says emergency managers are discovering that CERTs are a great way to connect with the public. "I see more and more emergency managers involved in CERTs" he says, adding that police departments are also more likely to be involved these days.

Although CERT didn't receive any federal funding in fiscal 2003, the seeds were there and programs continued to multiply. For fiscal 2004, Congress appropriated $40 million for the Citizen Corps Council, though that umbrella now includes Neighborhood Watch, Volunteers in Police Service and the Medical Reserve Corps in addition to CERT. In other words, the pot of funding has been growing, but so has the number of potential applicants. The CCC has requested $45 million for fiscal 2005.

In the meantime, FEMA continues to support CERT with training materials, a CERT Web site and train-the-trainer courses at the EMI and at the state and regional levels. Interested jurisdictions and CERTs should contact their state emergency management agencies or their local CCC representatives.

The origins of CERT

In the mid-1980s the idea for community response teams had grown from the need to better prepare California residents for that state's frequent earthquakes. Los Angeles sent investigative teams to Japan and Mexico in 1985 to study how those countries prepared for and responded to earthquakes.

In Japan, the Los Angeles team found that the government had trained entire neighborhoods to respond to one consequence of an earthquake. These single-function neighborhood teams were trained in either fire sup-

pression, light search and rescue, first aid or evacuation.

Later in 1985, following the devastating earthquake in Mexico City that killed more than 10,000 people, Los Angeles dispatched another investigative team. That group found that "Mexico City had no training program for citizens prior to the disaster." However, the team's report said, "large groups of volunteers organized themselves and performed light search and rescue operations." Those volunteers saved more than 800 lives, but lost more than 100 of their own number.

"The lessons learned in Mexico City," the Los Angeles CERT Web site <www.cert-la.com> says, "strongly indicated that a plan to train volunteers to help themselves and others, and become an adjunct to government response was needed as an essential part of overall preparedness, survival and recovery."

In a pilot program the following year, the City of Los Angeles Fire Department trained 30 members of a Neighborhood Watch program in one neighborhood. Rather than form a Japanese-style single-function team, the department decided on a multi-functional volunteer team trained in basic fire suppression, light search and rescue, and first aid. That first team was a great success, but a tight city budget limited expansion of the program.

In 1987, shaken literally and figuratively by the Whittier Narrows earthquake, Los Angeles formed a disaster preparedness unit in the fire department. One of the unit's objectives was to "develop, train and maintain a network of Community Emergency Response Teams." That was the real start of the program.

CERT got a big boost from FEMA in 1993, when the agency made the concept and program available to communities nationwide. With help from the City of Los Angeles Fire Department, EMI added to the CERT materials and made them applicable to all hazards. The Citizens Corps Council took over as CERT's umbrella organization in 2002, and, as we've seen, the program

has flourished. [*Ed.: For more on the history of CERTs, see "The real first responders," Sept/Oct 2002. For more on CERT-type groups in Japan, see "Japan: Tremors of change," Nov/Dec 2002.*]

A variety of starting points

Jurisdictions have had different reasons for starting CERT programs. Like Los Angeles, many communities on the West Coast formed CERTs because they wanted to be better prepared for earthquakes.

For example, in Fremont, Calif., the after-action reports from the Northridge and Loma Prieta earthquakes showed that the public safety services had been overloaded and 911 calls had had to be prioritized. "This indicated to us a need to get the citizens involved," says Div. Chief Vic Valdes of the Fremont Fire Department.

Rowlett, Texas, is a suburb of Dallas with a mostly residential population of 50,000. The city's fire and rescue

Fremont, Calif., CERT members take fire extinguisher training.

department formed a team in spring 2001 because of the need for citizen support of first responders during long-term emergency incidents. Basically, the team would set up a rehab site, give firefighters fluids and snacks, and take blood pressures and similarly assist the police department at large incidents.

Later, the city's first actual CERT team was trained by a group of ham radio operators sent to the National Fire Academy for a train-the-trainer course. The pre-existing team, now called CERT Relief, was rolled in as a subgroup of the CERT, with its mem-

bers gradually receiving full CERT training.

The CERT in Olathe, Kan., also had its origins in a group of ham radio operators, who had functioned previously as storm spotters. (Olathe's surrounding county, Johnson County, had formed a CERT in 1998 after studying teams on the East and West Coasts.) The city graduated its first team in March 2001.

Fairfax County, Va., took a neighborhood approach to CERT, says Chief Michael Neuhard of the county's fire and rescue department. "After 9-11," he says, "it was apparent that in times of large-scale community disasters, first response agencies were pushed to extreme limits. Fairfax County wants to leverage the community, more specifically the citizens, to help in response to disasters."

The county has "a fundamental belief that citizens have a need to respond to a disaster," he adds, which is evident in the tremendous response from citizens who want the training.

One of Fairfax County's CERT groups is in the Town of Herndon, where the team grew from the police department's Citizens Support Team. "The town thought CERT would be a nice complement to the police unit," says Hal Singer, Herndon's CERT coordinator and a member of the police support team.

This arrangement requires the CERT to grow, he explains. "If an incident occurs, the police will want its support unit, thus depleting the number of members available to CERT, so the decision has been made to expand the CERT group."

Recruiting

CERT organizations have a variety of both traditional and non-traditional marketing techniques to recruit new members.

Rowlett, for example, used the shotgun approach, with booths at public events, articles and advertisements about CERT in the local newspapers, a flyer in the water bill, and a presentation before the city council, which was videotaped for later broadcast on the

city's cable-access TV channel. Chief Larry Wright of the Rowlett Fire Rescue Department says the water bill flyer received the most response, though not necessarily the most recruits. The city has a goal of 175-200 CERT members,

The triage area at the 2003 Olathe CERT exercise.

with 107 now trained.

The emergency management coordinator in Olathe, Rita Hoffman, says the initial CERT recruitment efforts were targeted at emergency service families "to get them involved in and allow them to plant the seeds about the benefits of CERT training."

She says the city then piloted a course to a neighborhood group, business, the school district, a church group and a county government agency. "CERT is also being promoted to city employees," she adds, "with the goal of slowly building a cadre of CERT-trained city employees."

Fairfax County also has used a variety of approaches, including the Virginia emergency management, Citizens Corps Council and Volunteer Fairfax Web sites, a flurry of initial publicity in local newspapers, and word of mouth.

In addition, the fire and rescue department's CERT coordinator, Bob Mizer, made a presentation to the county's Federation of Community Associations. Mizer says the county now has four teams with a total of 62 trained members, including the first community association–based CERT, in the Canterbury Woods section, where 20 citizens were trained this past winter. The department's goal is 2,000 CERT members in 100 teams, affiliated with every fire station in the county.

Herndon's recruiting effort featured a brochure, which was placed in libraries, the visitors center, popular restaurants and anywhere else it would be visible. In addition, Singer created a PowerPoint presentation for the town's cable-access TV channel and a mailbox on yahoo.com.

Fremont focused on community-based organizations, faith-based groups, ham radio operators and the Red Cross. The Fremont CERT has a current strength of 2,000, but the goal is an ambitious 21,000. Valdes says, "10% of the city's population of 210,000 committed to the same level of training would mean the city is well prepared."

Training

One common shortcoming with CERTs, says Lucier, is that people don't understand that "the generic FEMA training" is intended to be customized at the local level.

"We have to customize this for our own community," he emphasizes, based on local threats, resources, topography and demographics. "People are going to have to start adding other skills, different skills for different hazards," such as sandbagging for floods and knowledge of wildland fire behavior and reporting.

As it happens, the jurisdictions interviewed for this article use the standard FEMA CERT training course, but tweaked the curriculum to accommodate their own situations. For example, Olathe added a unit on fire department operations and responsibilities. That unit includes a "show-and-tell" session during which the fire department demonstrated its specialized equipment to the trainees.

Fremont uses the standard FEMA course, but has added an emphasis on earthquakes because a major fault runs right through the city. Valdes says the city has also developed an additional curriculum, "Personal Emergency Preparedness," that CERT members will teach to the citizens.

As with their marketing efforts, local CERTs are using both traditional and non-traditional techniques to conduct refresher training and are using refresher training to try to hang on to their members. Johnson County conducted a countywide CERT Rodeo to allow members to come back and refresh their training. The team is also

Citizen Corps Councils growing also

The National Citizen Corps Council was launched in January 2002 as an integral component of USA Freedom Corps. The Freedom Corps was created to help coordinate activities targeted at making communities safer across the country. Citizen Corps provides opportunities for people to participate in a range of measures to prepare their homes, families and communities for the threats of crime, terrorism and disasters of all kinds.

There are now 53 Citizen Corps Councils in states and territories and nearly 1,200 in local jurisdictions, covering nearly 140 million people or 48% of the total population.

The Community Emergency Response Team Program is a council program, as are Neighborhood Watch, the Medical Reserve Corps and Volunteers in Police Service. Citizen Corps and CERT are coordinated nationally by the Department of Homeland Security.

Citizen Corps has an affiliate program which allows it to expand the resources and materials available to state and local communities by partnering with other programs and organizations that offer resources for public education, outreach and training.

For example, Citizen Corps and the National Association for Search and Rescue recently announced an official affiliate partnership, the purpose of which is to raise public awareness about emergency preparedness and search and rescue as a critical component of community safety through the state and local Citizen Corps Councils.

For more information about the National Citizen Corps Council, go to its Web site at <www.citizencorps.gov>.

doing the obligatory disaster drill and several in-depth training sessions that focus on specific skills.

Hoffman says the Olathe team wants to improve its radio communications, so it's working up a communications class. In addition, the Olathe CERT will be conducting training on how to deal with animals during a disaster.

Fairfax County is looking for ways to keep the teams engaged, according to Neuhard, so it will be conducting mass-casualty drills and open houses at fire stations, among other activities. "It is important to emphasize that CERT skills can be used every day," Neuhard says, "because CERT members are a force multiplier for everyday incidents, such as someone collapsing on the street, not just for disasters." The county will also sponsor a refresher day every year, which will be a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on training.

Fremont, Calif., CERT members in a lifting and cribbing exercise.

Herndon is planning to hold refresher training at least three times a year, in addition to joint training and disaster drills with other CERTs in Fairfax County.

Rowlett's fire and rescue chief, Larry Wright, thinks "retention is going to be a big problem. How do we keep them interested?" Accordingly, he plans to use the CERT for more than just disasters and terrorism incidents. Rowlett

will deploy its team for community events and has scheduled more in-depth training, for example, a 40-hour EMS class. (A publication called "Starting and Maintaining a CERT Program" is available on the FEMA Web site.)

Organization and funding

With roughly 12 members, plus 35 on the waiting list for training, the Herndon CERT is a fledgling organization While the team is part of the Fairfax County CERT network, it also operates independently, securing its own funding, as does the Canterbury Woods team. Both are assembling and submitting grant applications to such organizations as Home Depot and Wal-Mart, which have funds available for local emergency response efforts, and both are exploring the possibility of securing non-profit status.

Herndon has put together a list of equipment necessary for the team, but

said its ultimate goal is a covered trailer with generators, bullhorns, binoculars and a host of other equipment.

The Rowlett Fire Rescue Department split the city into nine zones divided by natural barriers. Each zone has a team leader and a calling tree for quick activation of the members in that zone. Members are charged with being intimately familiar with their neighborhoods and are expected to be self-sufficient for 72 hours.

Rowlett's CERT has received a Citizens Corps Council grant and achieved 501(c)(3) status, which Wright says is very important because the team is eligible for donations. The team has received contributions from Wal-Mart and the local women's club, and will be seeking corporate donations in the near future. [*Ed.: For more on private-sector support of CERTs, see "CERTs and the private sector," March 2003.*]

Fremont is divided into six districts, each of which has a coordinator, assistant coordinator and communications officer. Each district also has a preparedness container, containing first aid equipment, backboards, stretchers, ham radios, tables, vests, sledgehammers, pry bars, charts and forms, as well as other necessary equipment. The citywide CERT leadership team and the district coordinators make up an informal executive committee.

Valdes says the Fremont CERT was funded initially from the city's general funds, but after local jurisdictions nationwide faced serious budget shortfalls, the team had to seek other sources of revenue. Like Rowlett, Fremont has received a CCC grant and, like Rowlett's, the Fremont CERT has received donations from local charitable organizations.

In Olathe, the city used a FEMA Project Impact grant to get its CERT started, but now relies on CCC grants. Olathe's goal is 1,100 team members. Hoffman is working with the GIS department to pinpoint where the 400 current CERT members are situated, so the program can pinpoint future training to fill in the geographic blanks.

CERT/fire department relations

During a recent CERT training class in an unnamed jurisdiction, the instructor was asked what the career firefighters had been told about CERT. The answer was, "Nothing yet!" This highlights one aspect of CERT, which must be handled with caution.

"This is an interesting challenge that fire departments need to work very carefully with," says Valdes, who hastens to add that it isn't a problem in Fremont. "The majority of the fire department staff understand the value of the CERT program and work with it."

In Rowlett, the CERT Relief program paved the way, says Wright. "Police officers and firefighters early on recognized the support the CERT can give at large-scale incidents and disasters."

Olathe and Johnson County came up with an interesting solution to initial resistance to CERT. CERT organizers approached the fire chiefs' association in Johnson County and were not well received initially. As noted above, the organizers then reached out to emergency services families to get them involved. When the organizers next approached the county fire chiefs' association, a deputy chief's wife came to speak on behalf of CERT.

In Boca Raton, Fla., where the CERT organization has 330 members, CERT has initiated a program to train firefighters about the team's responsibilities and operations. In addition, team members are invited to breakfasts at the fire stations in their areas.

Fairfax County Fire and Rescue started by telling battalion chiefs about CERT during battalion chiefs' meetings.

Then Bob Mizer, the CERT coordinator, started having conversations with station captains. This spring, the department issued a bulletin to all stations and divisions, notifying them that the first CERT class had graduated and that CERTs would "function as a citizen arm of the Fire and Rescue Department."

The bulletin went on to describe the training and the roles the teams can adopt: "In addition to disaster roles, the CERT program can provide community service by having the teams perform non-emergency public service duties during community events or assisting with smoke detector installation and other public safety initiatives.

"In the event of a large-scale disaster where our response is limited, the Fire and Rescue Department will depend on the established CERT to assist in operations. It is anticipated that the Incident Commander will utilize the CERT Leader/Incident Commander as a section or branch leader as appropriate."

The memo called the working relationship between the team and its community fire station "the key to the success of the CERT program." The department plans to introduce the CERTs to their neighborhood fire stations at evening meetings "to ensure that the staff knows the teams in their area and are familiar with the CERT's capabilities and training."

Demonstrated usefulness

FEMA's Sam Isenberger thinks that

A sample local CCC mission statement

The mission of the Rowlett Citizen Corps Council is to harness the power of the citizens of Rowlett, TX, through education, training, and volunteer service to make our community safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to the threats of terrorism, crime, public health issues, and disasters of any kind.

This mission is accomplished through community-based programs that build on our strengths and implement plans for our citizens to participate through:

Personal Responsibility: Developing household preparedness plans and disaster supplies kits, observing home health and safety practices, implementing disaster mitigation measures, and participating in crime prevention and reporting.

Training: Taking classes in emergency preparedness, response capabilities, first aid, CPR/AED, fire suppression, and search and rescue procedures.

Volunteer Service: Engaging in volunteer activities that support first responders, disaster relief groups, and community safety organizations.

Everyone can do something to support Rowlett's law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, community public health efforts, and the four stages of emergency management: prevention, mitigation, response and recovery efforts.

CERT is "accomplishing what it was meant to accomplish, involving people in the community." He points to recent CERT deployments as evidence of this, including wildfires in Arizona and California, Hurricane Isabel in Virginia, storm clean-up in Kansas and flooding in Washington.

Some of the CERTs mentioned in this article have already deployed. In 2002, the Olathe CERT was activated during an ice storm to help the needy and assist people who just couldn't deal with the debris. The following year, the team was activated after a series of tornadoes, again to help with debris removal.

The Fremont CERT has been activated several times during periods of heavy rain. The city's street maintenance department usually becomes overrun with blocked street drains, and the CERT members have helped clear the drains, thus helping to avoid a near disaster, says Valdes.

The Herndon team was deployed to a large town festival. CERT members helped the fire department staff the first aid tent and performed other duties.

Valdes calls CERT a "program that connects the government to the community and helps build that critical relationship. It's a great program, it makes sense and it's good for the community."

Looking ahead

What's ahead for CERT? Everyone agrees that growth is the number-one priority, while number two is ironing out the inconsistencies among CERT programs around the country.

A new resource on the FEMA Web site should help with both these priorities. The resource is a Web-based independent study program called "Introduction to Community Emergency Response Teams."

The program will introduce people to the CERT concept and materials and prepare them for classroom training. For members who have already completed the CERT training, the study will reinforce concepts learned in the classroom. When the program is completed, participants will receive a certificate. The program is available at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/CERT/>.

Finally, in an article on his community preparedness Web site, The Connection <www.naem.com/connection.html>, Lucier makes an interesting suggestion for changing the disaster preparedness culture of the United States. He would like to change the culture "from one of depending on everyday 911 emergency response to one of self-sufficiency and active response and assistance following a disaster….

"Cultural change in this country has always begun with the children. In the future, CERT training should be part of the education program in the schools. Then and only then will we be truly prepared as a nation." HPP

Colin A. Campbell is a freelance writer based in Annandale, Va., and has nearly 30 years of experience covering fire service and emergency management issues. He recently helped organize a 20-person CERT in the Canterbury Woods section of Fairfax County, Va., the county's first community association–based team, and has completed the county fire and rescue department's 32-hour CERT training.